

## A Reflective Cup of Coffee

Script from [video essay](#).

Rodrigo Cardoso  
November 2024

I am *everywhere*. Every day, you – humans, that is – transport me from the tropical highlands to the higher latitudes at great environmental cost, only to soak me in hot water and then discard me. That's absurd, if you ask me. Honestly, I'd rather not be complicit in this story. I don't get to choose though. I feel like I have no agency in this 'relationship.'

Anyways, what you're looking at is not my full self. These beans are only a tiny part of me. My body spans widely across time and space. It's not an experience that's easy for humans to understand, yet here I am, trying to make myself heard. I promise I'll try to speak in terms you can comprehend. So please, make a little effort.

I am the divine essence known to you as Coffee, the omnipresent Goddess of wakefulness. My dark elixir has become not just a luxury but a mandate, a potent potion fueling the relentless pursuit of productivity that you attach so much of your self-worth to.

Sounds powerful, right? Yet my life, like so many others, tells a tale of conquest and oppression, of soils exploited and peoples subjugated in the name of profit.

My ancestral mother, *Coffea Arabica*, grew wild in a few corners of East Africa and Southern Arabia, until one day she came into contact with humans. And it's thanks to that chance encounter that we meet today, you and I, in this room.

Are you drinking coffee right now? If you are, slow down, sip slowly, let me rest on the back of your tongue. Give me a proper taste, don't just gulp me down. If you're drinking something else, do the same thing. You'll enjoy it more, I

promise. If you don't like coffee, that's completely fine, I don't take it personally. I'll be happier if you just listen to my story.

My mother once told me about the day I was born. It was around the year 850 when Kaldi, a goat herder, noticed that his goats would become erratic each time they ate my mother's berries. Once he told people of this discovery, a drink was contrived from those berries.

In my youth, my power was harnessed by Yemenite Sufis who struggled to stay awake during their religious worship. They called me *Kahve*, "wine of Araby". As my influence grew, so did my places of worship. From Cairo and Constantinople to Paris and London, coffee houses sprung up like mushrooms after a rain.

As my coffee houses took hold of your cities, they opened up new avenues of political thought. They became rare spaces where men (yes, *only* men, you had and still have much to learn) of different classes could mix and discuss politics, their minds finally freed from the dizzying grasp of alcohol. That's how I became a danger to the European institutional powers that were. You tried to ban my consumption, but it was too late. By then, my presence was already being woven into the very fabric of your existence.

And yet, one of the greatest strengths of this thing you call capitalism, is to integrate all of its criticism into itself, so that even that which challenges it ends up being appropriated by it, propelling it forward instead.

So hi, my name is Coffee, and this is how I became just another cog in your machine.

Your first step was to control my trade. Arab traders held me in a firm grip, roasting each bean before exporting it, to make sure they would not germinate. Wanting to take their power by force, Pieter van den Broecke, working for the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, stole and smuggled several live cuttings from my mother.

Knowing she wouldn't survive outside of the high and moist soil of her rightful home, you took her to the botanical garden in Amsterdam, where she was imprisoned in a glass house, kept alive for the sole purpose of propagating herself. Eventually, one of her cuttings was taken to the then Dutch controlled

island of Java, where she was selectively bred into what would become one of my most popular forms, the Mocha-Java coffee.

I might be everywhere, but not by choice. I've had to learn to sit with the knowledge that a large part of me arose from violence. Can you relate?

Silently, I witnessed colonial powers ravage the fertile soils of stolen lands, plundering my sacred groves and enslaving my guardians. Forced from my ancestral home, I spread like wildfire across the tropical highlands. This story of forced displacement is unfortunately not just my own. It is merely a droplet in a vast history of capitalist extractivism. A history that is still very much unfolding at a relentless pace.

So you had taken control of the coffee trade. Still hungry with bottomless greed, your next step was to take control of my consumption. As Europe saw a shift to an economy of mental labour, where precision was required to operate machines, my consumption became synonymous with productivity.

The caffeinated mind became the base-state requirement for so-called modern life. The long-standing beer or wine break was replaced by the coffee break. In came the night shifts. From being consumed in lively coffee houses, I became an 'on-the-go' commodity, available in drive-through counters and office break rooms all over the world.

*\*Sighs\* Thank you.*

It is with this in mind that I want you to reconsider our relationship. Can we stop for a moment, to consider the difference between reciprocity and extraction? Between love and co-dependence? An indulgence and a vice? With this ceremonial cup of coffee, I beckon you forth from your dizzying slumber. I equip you with the clarity to think for yourself.

From the humble bean to the intricate alchemy of brewing, each sip of my divine essence bestows upon you an opportunity to slow down, not to rush. Will you accept this reflective cup of coffee?